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Researchers Launch Survey of Massachusetts Coast

*Scientists will search for non-native species that could harm Commonwealth's
Marine Environment*

BOSTON – For three days beginning tomorrow (7/24), 20 researchers will scour docks and piers along the coast from Cape Cod to Cape Ann, searching for non-native species of plants and animals that could harm the Commonwealth's marine environment, economy and public health.

The inspection of permanently floating docks and piers in Woods Hole, Sandwich, Bourne, Boston, Salem and Gloucester is coordinated by the Massachusetts Bays Program in the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) and MIT Sea Grant, a research program of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Research takes place in Woods Hole July 24; the Sandwich Marina and the Massachusetts Maritime Academy July 25; and Rows Wharf in Boston, Hawthorne's Cove in Salem, and the Gloucester State Fish Pier July 26.

The three-day Massachusetts sweep is part of a seven-day effort to collect, identify and catalogue plants and animals in coastal waters from Woods Hole through Maine's mid-coast. Goals of the study include developing a baseline inventory of marine species, identifying plants and animals recently introduced to local ecosystems, and helping natural resource managers prevent and control future invasions of non-native species. Surveys in 2000 and 2003 revealed 34 introduced organisms, several of which were identified for the first time in New England coastal waters.

"Invasive species can have devastating consequences for native marine ecosystems, and present unique challenges for managers of bays, beaches and estuaries – the very places that define the special character of the Massachusetts coast," said EOEEA Secretary Ian Bowles. "This week's survey will give us the up-to-date information we need to safeguard natural resources along the Commonwealth's shores."

Factors such as international shipping and growth of the aquarium trade have recently accelerated the spread of non-native species into local waters.

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The country's most notorious aquatic interloper is the zebra mussel, a European species introduced into the Great Lakes in the 1980s and now beginning to infest New England lakes and rivers. Prolific breeders, zebra mussels crowd out native species and colonize power plant and industrial water intake pipes – causing millions of dollars of damage each year nationwide.

In New England coastal waters, the European green crab and Asian shore crab prey on commercially valuable shellfish, while other invasive species damage piers and pilings, clog pipes, damage fisheries and cause public health problems by potentially transporting disease and pathogens. Of particular concern is recent discovery of the fast-growing sea squirt on the highly productive shellfish beds of Georges Bank. With the potential to cover the sea floor like a mat, this species threatens to impact scallop fishing.

In addition to the Massachusetts Bays Program and MIT Sea Grant, other organizations providing funds and support for this week's survey include the Massachusetts Aquatic Invasive Species Working Group in EOEEA's Office of Coastal Zone Management, the New Hampshire Estuaries Project, Casco Bay Estuary Partnership, Northeast Aquatic Nuisance Species Panel, and Maine Marine Invasive Species Working Group. Scientists participating in the project include three Massachusetts Bays Program staff, as well as researchers hailing from The Netherlands, Brazil, Canada and throughout the US.

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